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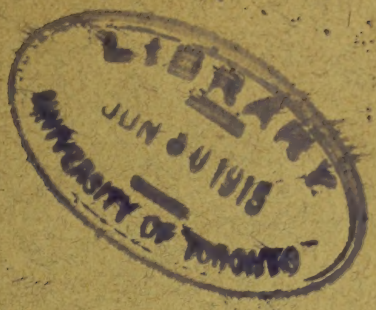
THE MODERN TREND IN SOTERIOLOGY



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The term "salvation" is the most significant in the language of religion. For the religion of every man is just his way of seeking salvation. If theology is the religious man's theory of things in general and at the same time his way of vindicating his loyalty to the religious life, then soteriology, or the theory of salvation, is an attempt to vindicate the motive of the religious life by an intellectual construction of it. It is the effort of intelligence to establish the worth of the specifically religious experience of an ascension from a worse state to a better by showing that it has a normal place in the whole of our human experience and, in the end, an ordered place in the whole universe. The experience of moral betterment is the root of all soteriology, and soteriology is the point of view central to all theology. A theological system is simply organized soteriology.

It seems, then, that a new soteriology is to be looked for when a fresh advance in the religious life has become a subject of conscious reflection. The new experiences into which men come in those spiritual movements that we call a religious revival or reform always seek for themselves an intellectual vestment in which the subject of them may come to know their worth and meaning and interpret them to others. A history of soteriology becomes a record of progress in the better life, that is, when each of the new formations of soteriology is a genuine product of its time. To inquire for the present trend in soteriology is first of all to ask for the present direction of the prevailing religious spirit.

It means more than this. For the very effort to apprehend the significance of the better life places it in relation to the whole realm of our experiences and calls into its service all the forces of current thought. A new soteriology, therefore, will appear also whenever

a step forward has been made in scientific interpretation, in social life, or in economic industry. If it be not forthcoming, the religious life becomes gradually alien to the rest of our life and suffers decline. A soteriology fashioned in the days when men thought the sun went round the earth or when they submitted to a social and political control that emanated from an autocrat or an aristocracy must be as unsatisfactory to the denizen of the modern world of diffused intelligence and democratic self-government as the hope of salvation from the Hebrew Yahweh could be to a modern Christian. Accordingly, the modern trend in theology can be discovered only by inquiring for the great influences (not only the religious but as well those not commonly called religious) that have been shaping our lives in the broad in modern times.

Our question becomes, therefore, In what way does an intelligent religious man of our times, aware of the inner relation of our religious life to our whole being, proceed to answer the question, "How are men saved?" Or, if we confine our attention to the Christian, the question becomes, In what way does the Christian believer scientifically construe the transition he and his fellow-believers have made from the lower to the higher life? The answer ought to show the character of the peculiar experience through which the modern Christian passes and the manner in which it stands related to the world of his consciousness. The present trend in soteriology will be shown when we point out the direction in which the thought of the modern Christian moves when he attempts to expound and vindicate the assurance he has of moral betterment.

In all soteriology there are two principal issues: first, the end to be attained in what we call salvation, second, the means of attaining it. The first of these is fundamental and the second is tributary to it. In the history of theological controversy, however, the second has received the emphasis, the difference in the views of what constitutes the good which has come to men in the saving process being the main root—though commonly unobserved—of controversy. Yet this is not so much to be wondered at if we remember that it is never possible for us to tell precisely wherein salvation finally consists since it has never been perfectly attained, whereas the means of salvation has always been more definitely

presented because its acceptance is supposed to be a matter of immediate practical necessity.

In the primitive Christian era salvation was conceived to be found in participation in the purity and righteousness of the kingdom of God, and the consequent freedom from misery and destruction at its coming. The way of salvation was found in the manner in which the transition was to be made out of the earthly, temporal, and sinful kingdom of this age into that better kingdom. It would be accomplished by the coming of Christ when the wicked should be overwhelmed in the cataclysm that should destroy the present order of things and the righteous share his glory after his final pronouncement upon their state at the judgment. Associated with this was the present personal attitude of the believer or unbeliever toward the Christ. In addition to this catastrophic view of salvation there are others, of which the view that Jesus made expiation for sin on the cross and that men are in a sense already saved is the most important. But it did not displace the first mentioned.

In the early Catholic era the Greco-oriental view that corruption flows from man's finitude and his consequent weakness and ignorance, and the longing for escape from this finitude into the infiniteness, light, power, incorruption, and immortality of the divine as the end of salvation, led to the Christian acceptance of the view that salvation is by deification. The human personality of Jesus was fitted into this scheme of thought. The idea of Incarnation became central to the theory, of salvation and controversy centered in the question of the divine-human personality of Christ. The means to salvation was found in the communication of incorruption through the mysteries.

In the mediaeval Roman church, with its assumed task of regulating the lives of men with a view to their eternal well-being, salvation was conceived, not through the contrast between mortality and immortality, but, immortality being accepted as universal, the contrast was between a blessed immortality and an immortality of woe. This blessed state would consist in the absence of sin and suffering and the possession of purity and happiness. The church was divinely commissioned to minister this salvation and possessed in her sacramental system the instrument for its bestow-

ment. Salvation was a matter of divine government. The means was found in actions prescribed in conformity with this legal system.

In the early Protestant time the view of salvation as an end was not very differently conceived but the immensely deeper view of sin that underlay the Reformation demanded a different view of the means. The nature of the divine government was more profoundly understood, sin had a more serious character, and moral necessity took the place of legality, or at least gave a deeper meaning to it, in the matter of salvation from sin. The infinite demerit of sin demanded an infinite penalty for its expiation and an infinite sufferer for the propitiation of the Lawgiver. Hence the way of salvation was solely by divine grace, effected solely through the divine sufferer, and received absolutely as a gift, by faith. But faith was purely a receptive attitude, and as a means was itself provided by God. Hence controversy attached to the question of justification.

For orthodox Protestantism, as for mediaeval Catholicism, salvation was conceived as within the framework of the divine government. The mediaeval terminology was substantially retained, but its meaning was deepened. The interest of the divine government was supreme and salvation was administered according to a predetermined "plan." The personal career of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible were set within this scheme and adjusted to it.

Modern soteriology is affected by all these views. It finds itself confronted by the terminology to which these views have given currency and a body of ideas that they represent, but the spiritual atmosphere in which it moves is vastly different. For early Protestantism possessed a wealth of spiritual potency that soon began to burst through the somewhat artificial limits set to its activity in the creeds and confessions of faith. The story of its progress in this direction is the history of modern theology. A brief outline of the principal spiritual forces let loose in Protestantism and the manner of their operation will bring us to a moderately clear view of the developing modern view of salvation.

1. The story of the evolution of the spiritual potencies of Protestantism brings out evidence that the Reformation released a powerful current of spiritual energy that had been dammed back

by the Catholic system. Men became possessed of a new confidence in the native ability of the human mind to discover ultimate reality and to interpret its meaning. The material universe lay invitingly before them and challenged them to discover its secret. The heavens were brought near, and men like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton worked out a revolutionary view of the whole cosmos. Bacon's *Novum Organum* elaborated the method of investigation through which Nature would yield her response to him who interrogated her as to her character, independently of all that was called revelation. The old cosmology was destroyed, and with the new came the necessity of reconstructing that representation of salvation which depended on the old cosmology and had made it a work of transferring a man in safety from earth to heaven rather than to hell, and also of reconstructing the representation of Christ's saving work so far as it has described him as coming from the place of heaven to the place of the earth and reascending to heaven. Such externalities could no longer have significance except as symbols.

The Protestant vindication of the prerogative and power of the individual human mind to interpret the divine revelation issued in a profound confidence also in its inherent creativeness. Beginning with Descartes and Spinoza and continuing down to Hegel, the attempt was virtually made to exhibit the whole of reality, known to man, as the product of thought. Deism in England and Illuminism in Germany disavowed the claim that saving truth could come to men only by a miraculous and miraculously attested revelation that implied disregard or contempt for native rational power. Many of their arguments were misleading because of extreme assumptions and ignorance of history, but, in the main, their plea for the dignity of the human intellect carried conviction to the intelligent world and made it impossible for a later age to regard the process of salvation as counter to the normal activities of the mind or in any degree independent of them.

Since those days there has been going on a steady obliteration of the opposition, and even of the boundaries, between the natural and the revealed. As a consequence, the former familiar contrast between nature and grace has been gradually abandoned. The

mode of salvation and the experience of it have their validity for the modern man when they are seen to coincide with the normal activities of our human spirituality. The aim of psychology to reduce to order the apparently chaotic occurrences within the human consciousness and the aim of physical science to reduce the apparently chaotic condition of the material world to order rest upon the assumption of the ultimate unity of all things. This has become a settled conviction with the mass of intelligent people and they are unable to give their adherence to any theory of human betterment that ignores or challenges the order of the cosmos.

2. Growing out of this confidence in the knowability of the natural and the universality of its laws, a kindlier view of the *character* of the material world and the worth of its processes for our highest good has emerged. To the devout Catholic the material world was, at bottom, evil, the material body was a clog upon the soul, and attention to the claims or the goods of either involved impurity to be expiated by penance. The orthodox Protestant only partly discarded this view. Calvinism took, on the whole, a gloomy view of the world and of the destiny of its denizens. Nature, human and non-human, was corrupt. Natural birth was birth in sin, without the personal consent of the sinner. Sin would cleave to men until they were separated from the body, when the believer should become instantaneously holy and the unbeliever should instantly become hopelessly lost.

The developed Protestant spirit finds itself in sharp antagonism with such a view of things. It has found itself increasingly at home in the present order and it has no fears of the discovery of the ultimate nature of the world. Nature is responding in kindly manner to our inquisition of her character and is placing her resources at our disposal. Her once supposedly malignant forces are turning out to be good for those who know how to use them. Matter appears not to be the foe but the friend and the instrument of spirit. Men are coming to feel that they are the heirs and foreordained masters of the world. He who by discovery and invention is enabling men to know the world and take possession of its wealth in the interest of humanity is contributing to human betterment, is working out human salvation.

In consequence, life has been taking on a richer meaning. Our regard for the worth of it has been deepened. The range of its activities has been widened. The obligations of life have been multiplied and the sacredness of them has been intensified. The attempt to escape from the physical is seen to be immoral. The "piety" that cherishes the ideal of world-flight is irreligious. The theory of salvation that counsels men to avoid the common things of life, with the associated toil and strain, or that places one's hope of purity in release from physical conditions is damning. Salvation can no longer be represented as deliverance *from* the world with its cry for aid, but as deliverance from a wrong attitude *toward* the world.

He who explores the heavens for men, or measures the geologic ages, or seeks the inner principle that relates man to all organic life, or discloses the pathway men have taken out of the past, or analyzes our psychic processes, or interprets the significance of the impulses that move us out into the vast unknown that still awaits our arrival is a laborer together with God. The process of salvation in the religious sense is not to be separated from this general movement of the spirit of the man out into the regions of the universe and his appropriation of its resources.

The Protestant tendency in soteriology is to see in the Christian revelation of the higher life the radical impulse that generates this movement above described, determines its end, and regulates its direction. Christianity is seen to be a faith in our divine sonship that rouses the conviction that all things are ours, fills us with an eagerness to make ourselves at home in the universe and to place its treasures as bounties at the feet of every man. Therewith come deliverance from the terror of this world or of the world to come and a joyful anticipation of blessedness in both.

3. With this growing view of the relations of men with the universe there have come a new insight into the continuity of human life and a new interest in its course. The historical spirit is abroad. We are trying to understand life in its unity—not merely in a metaphysical sense—but in its evolution in time. There is a persistent effort to find some sort of developing order in the tangled skein of life and even in the mutual antagonisms of men and the

strifes of race with race to trace the steps of a forward movement. The Christian ideal of the kingdom of God is obtaining an interpretation barely dreamed of in the past.

The true historical spirit with its appreciation of movements in time was substantially unknown to theologians until lately. The significance of the rise of the historical spirit, as respects the doctrine of salvation, may be seen by reference to its characteristic attitude toward human life. The past is contemplated not merely as antecedent to, or even the cause of, the present, but as organic to it. The past fulfils itself in the present. The quantum or the character of the life of the past is not preserved unchanged. There is a *plus* which comes out of the past but is at the same time worthier. Thus the well-being of the present generation of men consists in the perpetuation of the spiritual attainments of the past generations and their enhancement in new lives under new conditions. Salvation is a spiritual momentum expanding in mass and force as it progresses. The blessings that come to men proceed horizontally, rather than perpendicularly. A "state of salvation" is a contradiction in terms.

We see, then, that the worth of any life, be it that of an individual person or that of a community, is dependent on the many streams of gracious power which have moved toward it and found their confluence in it, while at the same time the individual or the new community becomes a new coefficient of that spiritual power. The Christian salvation, if by that we mean the elevation of human life in dignity, purity, and power, is more than the rescue of so many people from a state of sinfulness or misery. It is a historical momentum moving down from Christ through the generations and in increasing volume perpetuating itself normally in the life of the present. It has a community character both in its successive aspect and in its contemporaneousness.

The purely individualistic conception of salvation is hereby set aside—not that the individual is overlooked or his value discredited, as we shall see presently—but his place in the kingdom of grace has been allotted to him in the course of the working providence that has brought him into contact with those currents of the power of moral uplift set in operation long ago and continued

through the communion that came into being as the consequence of the career of Jesus Christ. Hence the earlier Protestant view of salvation as coming to the elect in an unaccountable way, by the arbitrary choice of an absolutist God, disappears. In place of it the devout soul sees in the union of all those forces which constitute the history of the world the focusing of influences from far and near upon the personal subject who experiences salvation. A numerical estimate of the saved and unsaved also loses its value.

But most of all is the change seen in the abandonment of the view that the work of salvation is something done once and for all at a definite point of time and that the benefits are appropriated by each for himself. The idea of a redemption forever complete in the past loses its appeal to the thoughtful spirit. Christ can no longer be represented as having finished in a few years the work of providing salvation and then having left the world for the bliss of heaven, but he is to be regarded as having come spiritually into the stream of our humanity and as progressively permeating it with his holy divine personality according to those divinely ordained universal laws of the vital process. This, again, carries with it a displacing of the common view that the work of salvation was portioned among the persons of the Godhead, and the substitution therefor of the simpler view that the gracious personality of Jesus continues his saving activity among men in the Spirit that operates in the Christian communion, and that this is just the work of God. Hereby all history is filled with a new meaning. For in its ultimate significance history becomes just the story of the preparation and perfection of the Christian salvation.

4. At this point we become aware of the new estimate placed on human life. For the modern man the human personality has become possessed of an infinite sacredness. So long as he was set apart by himself the salvation or the ruin of the individual could not be a matter of far-reaching importance. God could spare him without a loss of his own glory. It is not so now. The man is essential to the race and the race, reverently, is essential to God. So to say, the energies wrapped up in the whole human race find their common focus in the eternal well-being of the individual human personality. He cannot be spared. The whole forward

movement of the race culminates in the perfection of his being. A few words may be added in exposition of his view.

The Catholic system clearly subordinated the individual to the interest of the community or—which was the same to Catholicism—the ecclesiastical order. The church was the depository of salvation; she imparted it to the man on condition of his submission to her authority or withdrew it when he became disobedient. The church must be preserved even though individual men must be sentenced to hell. Hence she limited his exercise of his native powers on every hand. The radicals of Protestantism reversed all this and exalted the prerogative of the individual. The church became with them a voluntary association of saved people. At the same time the community idea of salvation was not abandoned, though it was held with varying degrees of clearness or obscurity by various types of Protestants. The relation of the religious community-life to the salvation of the individual was only dimly perceived, and it was to be expected that in the violent reaction against Catholicism the emphasis should fall on the worth of the individual. On the whole this was a sound view, though it was an incomplete apprehension of the way of salvation.

The profound sense of personal worth that came into action in Protestantism developed a personal aggressiveness never before equaled. It was shown in the establishment, at great cost, of the right of personal liberty in the political, intellectual, and religious life. Modern constitutional government, modern educational methods, and the organization of the free churches are some of the fruits. Nowhere is the power of the new movement more manifest than in the jurisprudence of Protestant countries. The rights of a criminal are guarded as sacredly as the rights of the innocent, though it is recognized that some of his rights have been forfeited. The exercise of capital punishment is confined to the sole instance of murder and that usually when there are no doubts of guilt and no extenuating circumstances connected with the act. Public executions have ceased because they are degrading to the witnesses and *to the criminal*. Penalities are assessed in such a way as to minister, if possible, good to the convict as well as to the community.

This is all extremely significant. It exhibits the genius of Protestant religious faith and at the same time shows the working in Protestantism of a principle that was in danger of being forgotten by Christendom, namely, on the one hand, the absolute, indefeasible worth of the individual human personality, and, on the other hand, the identity of the worth and interest of the individual with those of the community. The root of it all is the awareness, on the part of the man, of his personal community of life with God—an assurance which resides within the self-consciousness—and the discovery along with it that he has thereby entered into a new and holy relation with his fellows. The community within which these convictions dwell can never sacrifice the individual to its own supposed interest. On the contrary, whether he be good or bad, the life and beneficence of the community focuses itself on him. The worth of the community is manifest in the personalities it produces. And, on the other hand, the life of the renewed man finds its true sphere of activity in the creation and development of such a community as becomes the true expression of the secret of his soul's communion with God.

There is herewith given a new trend to the doctrine of atonement. It has been set forth beautifully (though, I fear, defectively through a failure to appreciate the significance of Christ) by Professor Royce in his recent work on *The Problem of Christianity*. There will be no attempt here to state the position there presented. The point I wish to make is, simply, that the doctrines of atonement and justification take on a new character, the ancient methods of justice on which they were based having been superseded. The idea of the satisfaction of justice by a requisite amount of suffering, of a penal *substitution* of the innocent for the guilty, of a formal acquittal—all completed at a certain point of the past—must give way to a *vital* conception of atonement. We are coming to see that the glory of Jesus is that he has brought into human hearts the operation of the Spirit of God that was his own, whereby men have come to share in the divine prerogative of self-devotion to the cause of the sinful and the fallen, and there has come streaming into the life of humanity a redemptive energy that lifts men up from the life of baseness and brings them to the fulfilment of the potentialities of their being.

5. There is one other consideration to be mentioned, and very briefly. With the recent diffusion of the Christian community over great areas of life has come a corresponding deepening of the religious spirit of the Christian people. Their missionary undertakings have brought them face to face with multiform faiths of all grades of worth and unworth. It is no longer possible to regard any of these as simply and altogether false. It is found that each of them, even if in only the lowest degree, offers an avenue of approach for the preacher of the Christian gospel. In any case, from the standpoint of the missionary, the religion of any people is its best possession. The Christian is driven to reflection anew on the meaning of the religious life and its relation to the other elements of our human career. Self-examination and self-chastening inevitably follow. Moreover, the converts bring their own spirituality to bear on the problems of faith. A fresh adjustment of religious ideas is taking place as the life of historic Christianity mingles with the life of the new converts.

A new doctrine of salvation is sure to be the outcome. As the entrance of early Christianity upon the domain of the ancient Greco-Roman people issued in the doctrine of salvation expressed in the Nicene and later creeds, as the conquest by the Christian church of the European peoples issued in the early Protestant doctrine of salvation, so the melting together of an occidental and an oriental Christianity in the new world emerging into view is sure to issue in a new formulation of the meaning of the experience of salvation. What the new formulations will be it is too soon to say, but of one or two things, I think, we may be confident. There will arise a new explanation of the relation of Jesus Christ to history. Questions of his pre-existence and post-existence will be laid aside as unpractical and unprofitable. In place of these will come a conviction of his eternal presence and a deeper insight into his significance for the unification of the whole of humanity in a life of mutual devotion and for the sanctification of all things to a human-divine end. There will also arise a new interpretation of what we mean when we speak of the Holy Spirit of God—a subject almost wholly undeveloped in the course of Christian thought in the past. Let us hope that the new oriental Christianity which is arising as the fruit of modern missions may accomplish in this

aspect of soteriology what is little more than hinted at in traditional orthodoxy and that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit will receive its due from the meditative mind of the East.

To summarize: Modern soteriology tends toward an interpretation of the Christian salvation that will differ as widely from the accepted soteriology of early Protestantism as the latter differed from the soteriology of the ancient Catholic church. It is not principally concerned with the question of how to attain to immortality or how to avoid an eternity of misery and gain one of bliss, though it ignores by no means the hope of the eternal and blessed life. It is rather concerned with the perfection of the human personality in the whole range of its powers and in the task of interpreting the universe in terms which make it tributary to this supreme aim. It does not seek to fix the hopes of men on some special provision or fixed arrangement through which by using the "means" prescribed they may secure a guaranty of ultimate safety, but it rather seeks to make men aware of the presence and character of those purifying and ennobling spiritual forces which have come into human history with redemptive power from Jesus Christ and aware at the same time of their own inner capacity to share in this redemption. Hence it is peculiarly intent on describing those spiritual experiences in men's souls by which they become conscious of participation in that life of self-mastery and of pure and loving self-devotion which is the very life of the Divine Spirit in men, by which also they consciously enter into that communion of mutual service in all good things which we call the church of the Living God—a communion in which each believer gives himself to the whole and all give themselves to each, and in which they find themselves possessed of unity of purpose with the God who works all things together for good to them that love him.